

"The Cow": an example of failure in intercultural communication

I am treating this working paper as if it was an oral presentation of the topic: "Extension and intercultural communication using a poster." An introduction and background information are felt to be unnecessary.

The poster reproduced on the next page was created and used in Egypt. Please take a careful look at it. Can you understand what it is trying to say? But of course it does not mean anything to you, because it is in Arabic. So it means as little to you as it does to most of the Egyptian peasants who it was produced for. They are illiterate. Maybe you can understand the two pictures without a text. Have a go!

If you were an Egyptian peasant, eager to know what the poster is saying, you could try to find someone to read it out for you. Perhaps one of your children could, if he has been to school. If he only went to the Koran school, he will have problems with some of the words. Maybe the village school teacher could read it for you, or the agricultural extension adviser, if you know him or come across him. If this were to happen, what you would find out is as follows (please look at the drawing on the next page but one). The small print on the lower edge of the poster, if you are sufficiently interested, tells you: (bottom right) Ministry of Agriculture, Headquarters of Agricultural Extension, Project for Agricultural Information; (bottom left) German - Egyptian Project El Nahda; Headquarters of Extension and Training; (bottom centre) Printed in the International Centre "Sirs Allian".

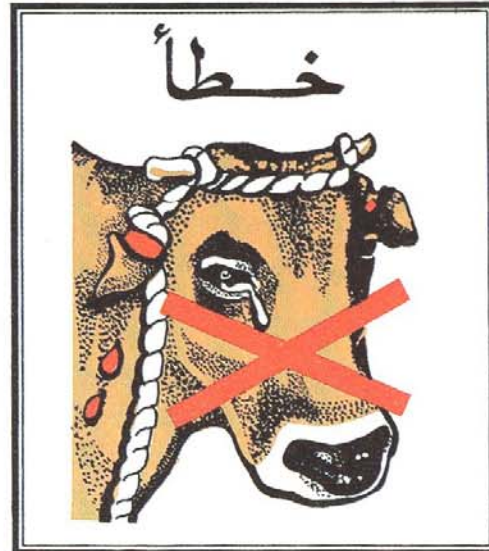
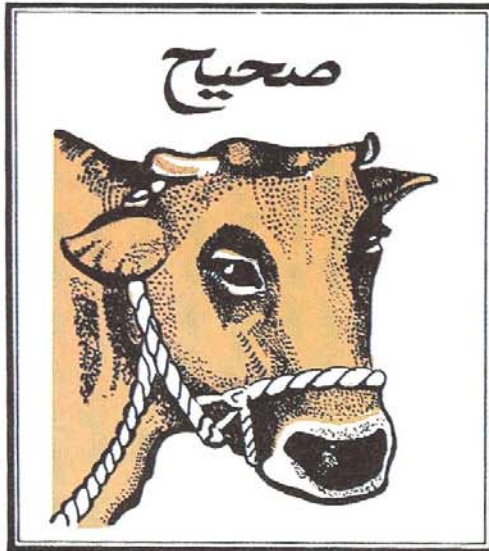
You may have understood the advice straightaway without having to read the text. But it is really only clear once you have sorted out the text. Egyptian peasants are in the habit of leading their cattle on a rope in a downright inconsiderate and inhumane way. They wind the rope round the horns and then again round one ear. This does not do the ears or the whole animal much good in the long run. It's all very obvious - a European halter ought to be used instead.

The whole topic may seem clear and basically very simple, and yet this wonderful poster is full of pitfalls if we care to look more closely. Perhaps we can spot some of them ourselves, but most of the difficulties only became apparent when the poster was held up in front of Egyptian farmers and they were asked to describe what they could see. We now list the critical points:

1 The "right" solution is in fact wrong

The graphic artist was an Egyptian, and he had obviously never tied a European halter. At the point where the loop round the animal's neck and the loop over the nose join at the side, they are knotted together so that the free end of the lead should start here. In the picture the lead begins too high up, the knot near the mouth is wrong in the drawing and impossible to imitate. This is a fundamental error, but it pales into insignificance when we look further.

كيفية ربط الماشية



المميزات

- لا تسبب آلام
- ومريحة للحيوان
- شهية جيدة
- إنتاجية جيدة

العيوب

- تسبب آلام والتهابات
- وقطع بالأذن
- ضعف الشهية
- إنتاجية أقل

المشروع المصري الألماني بمنطقة النهضة - إدارة الإرشاد والتدريب

وزارة الزراعة - الإدارة العامة للإرشاد الزراعي - مشروع الدعم الإعلامي

طبع بمركز سريس البان الدولي

2 The red cross is particularly striking

Even if illiterate peasants merely glance at the picture, their attention is caught as if by magic by the red cross over the face of the cow on the right. They have never seen anything like it in their lives. The alienation principle, attracting attention by showing something familiar in a new light, and the eye-catching red do their duty. There is nothing strange like this about the cow on the left, and people pay it hardly any more attention. So the mistake in showing how the rope is tied is now relatively unimportant.

3. Wrong interpretation of the red cross

If we ask the farmers what the red cross means, they see two strange red ropes that mean nothing to them at all. Crossing out in red to show something is wrong is a typical symbol traditionally used in European schools where teachers correct in red. An illiterate cannot possibly be familiar with such conventions.

4 The tear misinterpreted

After the red rope, the farmers refer to the drop falling from the eye of the cow on the right. The cow is sick; it has a festering inflammation of the eye. This interpretation is absolutely correct, of course. Cattle cannot cry. Their tear mechanism does not convulse and empty when they feel pain. Logically, therefore, the connection between the tear, pain and a bleeding ear is absurd.

5 An appeal to pity is inappropriate

A central European, even though he knows about the anatomy of a cow's eye, will automatically see the discharge from the eye as a tear because he sees a connection with the bleeding ear. Blood and tears are such closely related concepts, linked by the idea of pain, that in the context of love of animals they immediately give rise to pity. But love of animals is for the most part alien to Egyptian culture. The peasant farmer regards his cow and his donkey as objects in the same way as his plough and his house. If his cow loses an ear, it only means that he has to tie the rope on the other side. This makes the cow just as useful as it was before.

6 Misinterpretation of the breed of cattle

Although the artist definitely took the local breed of cattle as his model, the farmers said they saw two black and white cows on the poster. They remained convinced of this despite the fact that the basic yellow brown clearly pointed to a local breed. The shaded areas were interpreted by the farmers as patches of black, which never occurred in the local breed. Local cattle were always of one color only. Cattle with more than one color had to be Friesians therefore. They had become familiar with them through the activities of the neighboring "Cattle Breeding Project El Nahda" that had organized slide shows and film evenings on Friesians. And who else but the Germans would think of printing and hanging up posters? The combination with yellow may be not quite right, perhaps you do see cows like that sometimes, but there is no doubt that the cows on the poster are Friesians from Germany.

HOW TO TIE A HALTER TO CATTLE

correct way



wrong way



ADVANTAGES

- does not hurt
- is comfortable
- normal appetite
- good production

very small print

DISADVANTAGES

- causes pain and inflammation
- cuts the ear off
- poor appetite
- low production

very small print

very small print

7 No connection between halters, health and "production"

The farmers cannot follow the connection established by the text. The word "production" is a foreign word in Arabic, too. Even if it is spelled out in terms of milk and meat, that does not help much either. It is true that the farmer now knows what is meant, but it does not concern him because he does not use his cow for "production". He needs it for work, for cultivating his fields. Milk is used primarily for raising calves. The family will consume 2 - 3 litres a day if there is any left over. There is practically no local and certainly no wider market for milk. There is limited sale of home-made cheese. Fattening cattle is practically the preserve of larger landowners. The farmer will only sell his cow when it is no longer capable of working. Healthy or sick, what difference does it make? Selling an old cow cannot be termed meat production. The local breed is tough, placid and hardy, and a bleeding or festering ear is not a worse condition than tick infestation or extreme shortage of fodder in the summer drought. The cows carry on working, come what may.

8 "Wild animals" need a strong handling and control

The farmers were inclined to overlook the European halter on the poster, but, if they were specifically asked about it during interviews, they had clear reasons for rejecting it. The halter might well be suitable for the placid Friesians but would be useless with the lively and often wild local animals. This is not an objectively valid statement, nor is it merely the product of an understandable local pride. When Friesians first appeared in the village, they were presumably well fed, had plenty of fodder and were about twice the weight of the local cattle. Perhaps they were weary because of the summer sun in Egypt (though they can tolerate it much better than expected), and finally they would have been led by a European halter in the strong hand of a German master dairyman. It is not surprising, then, that they looked especially mild-tempered.

How different the local breed! They are only well fed in the spring after a lush and rainy winter season which, according to rotation, produces fresh Alexandrine clover every day in the fields. But over the summer they are reduced to skin and bone, fed only on rice straw, water and any greenery growing by the tracks at the side of ditches and canals of the irrigation system, and on harvest residues and weeds that sprout between harvest and the next sowing. Moreover they have to compete with donkeys, sheep and camels. With an average of 2 ha of irrigated cropping land, the peasant family's own needs mean that fodder cropping in summer is out of the question.

The result of this is that the animals have to be taken out to graze every day in the summer. They are not led by men, however, but by little children who are under school age and are still too young to work in the fields. I myself have often seen 6 - 8 year old girls walking with up to three cows from the village to the fields. And if a cow played up, a quick jerk on the rope was enough to bring it to heel.

9 Confirmation of the "wrong" solution

All these various points combine to create an overall impression of the poster; they influence and endorse each other. It can be no surprise to learn then that the majority of farmers summed up their reactions with: *"How are we supposed to tie a halter to cattle? As in the picture on the right, of course! Even the Germans think this method is best for their Friesians."*

Their conclusions give the story a kind of happy ending and perhaps we should be grateful for this outcome. It saved the numerous, respectable institutions named in the small print from losing face, at least in the eyes of the less educated small farmers.

But if there is still any doubt about how to put a rope on a cow in Egypt, a visit to Sakka-ra, behind the pyramids of Gizeh near Cairo, is recommended. There you can see the tombs with their wonderful friezes in low relief showing among other things rural life in Egypt 4 000 years ago. They show, in such natural detail that we can imitate it today, how halters were put on cows long ago. And for good reason!

Postscript

Since there was no introduction, a postscript would appear appropriate.

1. Correction

For maximum impact I have deliberately ignored other views on the poster. I have also been somewhat satirical and humorous - a stylistic approach intended to contrast with the sad, almost hopeless core of the message. The reader of this serious handbook and the creators of the poster perhaps deserve an apology and certainly have a right to be treated more objectively.

Everything I have described was the product of empirical investigation, but it was far from representative of all the farmers interviewed. The overall level of comprehension of the intended message established by interview is shown in \Rightarrow Table 1.

2. Source

I certainly had considerable doubts about the effectiveness of the poster, but I am grateful to ABDEL HAMID IBRAHIM AHMED, an agricultural engineer from the Agricultural Extension Research Center, Cairo, for providing me with detailed information and the following table.

Table 1: Farmers' comprehension of the "cow poster", arranged according to education

	Illiterate		Literate without school leaving certificate		with school leaving certificate		Total	
Message fully understood	10	15.6%	19	52.8%	5	71.4%	34	31.8%
Message partly understood	13	20.3%	7	19.4%	2	26.8%	22	2.6%
Message not understood	41	64.1%	10	27.8%	-	-	51	47.7%
Total	64	100.0%	36	100.0%	7	100.0%	107	100.0%

While I was present in the project "Development Support Communication" in Mariut near Alexandria, Abdel Hamid carried out surveys to evaluate project activities with small farmers. One of the questions in his survey for his Master's thesis concerned the cow poster. When he happened to mention his results, I was immediately interested. When the poster evaluation was presented to the project workers for the first time, its impact was striking.

3. Origins of the poster

On the one hand there are some typical mistakes in the poster that will unfortunately be repeated again and again in development cooperation. On the other hand, this poster was a one-off item and is to be understood as such.

Both the El-Nahda project and the neighboring Mariut media project were in the process of being built up or restructured. The personnel were new to the location. Both projects were under pressure to get things moving. Above all, project cooperation had to show immediate results. The idea of the expert on animal husbandry for this poster was welcomed and seemed perfectly reasonable. There was no time for tests. It was imperative to print something. But in the end they have learned their lesson from this failure.

I have not used this incident to gloat over the misfortunes of others or to ridicule the man who created the poster; I simply want others to learn from the mistakes that were made.

4. Some ideas on how to exploit this case

Presenting this poster has proved its worth as a component in training and further training. It is advisable to put the poster presentation at the beginning of general theoretical explanations and discussions. It is then possible, depending on the aims, the situation and the participants, to probe more deeply into the problems of ethnocentrism, intercultural communication, human perception, stages in systematic problem solving, basic questions of the function of agricultural extension or the principles of creating illustrative material.

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Compiled by:

Volker HOFFMANN